

The vital connection between emotional intelligence and well-being – Part 1: Understanding emotional intelligence and why it matters

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The term “emotional intelligence” (EQ) was coined by psychologists Peter Salovey and John D. Mayer (1) in the 1990s and popularized by Daniel Goleman (1995) in his best-seller, *Emotional Intelligence: Why It Can Matter More Than IQ* (2). Defined as “the subset of social intelligence that involves the ability to monitor one’s own and others’ feelings and emotions, to discriminate among them, and to use this information to guide one’s thinking and actions” (3), it quickly became a concept of importance in education, business, and popular culture. It served as the missing link to explain an unexpected finding: 70% of the time, people with average IQ (cognitive intelligence) outperform those with the highest IQ (4). This was puzzling because IQ was considered a strong predictive measure of workplace performance and, for many, was assumed to be the sole source of success. Now we know that IQ accounts for only about 25% of the success in one’s career (5). Emotional intelligence is the critical differentiator. People who are successful at work aren’t just smart — they have high EQ.

High EQ is especially important for those who work in emotionally demanding occupations such as healthcare. In veterinary medicine, this is particularly true in companion animal practice. With most families considering their pets members of the family, and veterinary teams committed to delivering high-quality healthcare services, emotions can often run high. In the emotionally complex world of veterinary practice, the ability to understand and manage emotions is critical (6). In fact, it may be just as critical to veterinarians’ well-being and career longevity as the ability to proficiently carry out the technical aspects of their work (7).

At first glance, the connection between EQ and well-being may not seem readily apparent; however, research indicates otherwise. Studies have shown that higher EQ leads to lower levels of stress, higher rates of positive emotional states and happiness, and better health and well-being (6,8–10). Studies have also

determined EQ is associated with healthier coping skills, suggesting that growing EQ may improve coping with stress (6,8). Although research on EQ in the veterinary profession has been limited, a recent study with veterinary students identified a negative correlation between EQ and stress, anxiety, and depression (SAD) (11). Students with higher EQ have lower levels of SAD, and those with lower EQ tend to have higher levels of SAD. Considering today’s mental health challenges (high levels of stress, anxiety, and depression); the consequential burnout, compassion fatigue, substance use and abuse, and suicidality; and the associated rise in turnover and attrition, EQ may be more relevant than ever before as a means to enhance health and well-being and preserve career longevity.

This article is the first of a 3-part series with the goal of supporting veterinary well-being. The series will cover what EQ is, the relevance of EQ to professional health and well-being, and how to develop and improve one’s EQ. This article focuses on understanding EQ and its relevance to well-being. The next 2 articles will offer a range of strategies to strengthen one’s EQ, focusing on the EQ competencies. Growing EQ offers a unique opportunity to improve professional health and well-being.

Understanding emotional intelligence

After decades of research, analysis, and scientific investigations, there are 3 major models to conceptualize EQ (12,13). This article focuses on the Emotional and Social Intelligence Leadership Competency Model as developed by Daniel Goleman and Richard Boyatzis (13,14).

According to Goleman and Boyatzis, EQ is an array of competencies that fall within 4 domains. The first 2 domains, *self-awareness* and *self-management*, have to do with *our ability to relate to ourselves*, reflecting “*personal* competence.” The other 2 domains, *social awareness* and *relationship management*, have to do with *our ability to relate to others*, reflecting “*social* competence.” Nested within the 4 domains are 12 EQ competencies: emotional self-awareness, emotional self-control, adaptability, achievement orientation, positive outlook, empathy, organizational awareness, influence, coaching and mentoring, conflict management, teamwork, and inspirational leadership (Table 1) (15). These are learned and learnable.

What emotional intelligence looks like

Although we cannot “see” EQ, we can see how it (and the lack of it) manifests in people’s behaviors. People with low EQ get stressed easily; they’re twice as likely to experience anxiety, depression, substance abuse, and even thoughts of suicide. They

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Table 1. Emotional intelligence domains and competencies (15).

Self-awareness	Self-management	Social awareness	Relationship management
Emotional self-awareness	Emotional self-control	Empathy	Influence
	Adaptability	Organizational awareness	Coaching & mentoring
	Achievement orientation		Conflict management
	Positive outlook		Teamwork
			Inspirational leadership

have a limited emotional vocabulary, and thus don't know how to accurately identify, and appropriately address, how they're feeling. They mask their negative emotions with positivity that isn't genuine or productive rather than express what they're truly feeling. They often feel misunderstood because they don't deliver their message in a way that others can understand. They blame other people for how they're feeling rather than taking responsibility for their own emotions. They have difficulty asserting themselves, and when crossed, default to passive or aggressive behavior. They make assumptions quickly and defend them vehemently, even with evidence to the contrary. They hold grudges, and in this way, prevent reconciliation. They don't let go of their mistakes, and thus are unable to adapt and adjust for future success. They don't know their triggers, the situations and people that "push their buttons" and cause them to act impulsively. And they're easily offended since they lack self-confidence. All of these behaviors are the hallmarks of low EQ (16).

In contrast, people with high EQ *respond* to people and situations instead of reacting to them. They're aware of their feelings, and of why they are feeling as they do, and can manage their emotions better than most. They sense the feelings of the people they interact with and understand others' way of seeing things. They're able to cut through the drama and stick to the facts. They can guide a tough conversation to a satisfactory agreement and help settle conflicts. They take in the whole view of the problem and look at all sides of the issue. They keep their focus on the main goals and know the steps it takes to get there. They're naturally positive and optimistic and can recover quickly when they get upset. They're aware of their limitations as well as their strengths. All of these behaviors are the hallmarks of high EQ (17,18).

Higher EQ means improved stress management, interpersonal functioning, leadership abilities, and job satisfaction (19). Emotional intelligence affects nearly everything we say and do, and in this way, influences nearly every outcome. Its intangible nature makes it difficult to know how emotionally intelligent any one of us may be. If you're wondering where you stand on the scale of low to high EQ, there are a variety of tools to measure it (20). Two such tests that are available online at no cost include those offered by Psychology Today (21) and Frameworks (22).

The relationship of IQ to emotional intelligence

An IQ is a measure of cognitive ability — the ability to learn and synthesize information. Although IQ depends on basic cognitive abilities (such as attention, perception, memory, and

language), it also depends on interacting with others, and in this way is related to EQ. As neuroscientist Aron Barbey affirmed, "We're fundamentally social beings and our understanding not only involves basic cognitive abilities, but also applying those abilities to social situations so that we can navigate the social world and understand others" (23). A person's IQ typically remains the same throughout life; it's the same at age 15 as it is at age 50 (15). One's EQ, on the other hand, can improve over time (4,22). Although some people are naturally more emotionally intelligent than others, anyone, at any time in life, can grow their EQ.

Growing emotional intelligence

Although you can't change your IQ, you *can* change your EQ. This is because of neuroplasticity. "Neuroplasticity" is the term used to describe the brain's ability to change — to continue growing and evolving in response to life experiences. To understand how EQ can grow, it's helpful to understand what EQ is as it relates to the structure and function of the brain.

The brain is made of 3 functional layers: the brain stem (instinctive brain), the limbic system (emotional brain), and the cortex (rational brain) (24). The emotional and rational brains are highly connected to one another through billions of neuronal connections. It's the free flow of information along these neuronal connections between the emotional and rational brains that "is," in essence, EQ.

Remember the saying, "Neurons that fire together wire together" (25)? Every experience (*i.e.*, thought, feeling, and behavior) you have triggers thousands of neurons that form a neural network. When an experience is repeated again and again, the brain learns to trigger the same neurons each time. Over time, these neurons will branch off small "arms" (similar to the branches of a tree) to connect with other neurons in a type of "chain reaction" (4). This neuronal growth *strengthens* the connections. So, when you repeatedly engage in new, emotionally intelligent behaviors, the billions of neurons along the path between the emotional and rational brains will grow, building the pathways needed to make these behaviors into habits (4,16). Practicing emotionally intelligent behaviors "trains your brain." Before long, you'll be responding with EQ without even having to think about it.

Making the commitment

Growing your EQ is a worthwhile pursuit. It can enable you to i) *better manage stress*, thus reducing the risk of anxiety, depression, burnout, compassion fatigue, substance use and abuse, and suicidality; ii) *better get along with others*, thus both

preventing and more effectively resolving conflict, reducing stress, and enhancing job satisfaction; and iii) *reach your highest potential* (i.e., self-actualize) through higher social and emotional functioning, thus enhancing your ability to express your unique leadership qualities (26). Emotional intelligence matters and, if cultivated, affords you the opportunity to realize a happier, healthier, and more fulfilled life.

Are you thinking you might benefit from a little more EQ? The next 2 articles will explore a range of strategies to grow EQ and help you take inspired action toward doing so. Growing EQ is not just possible — it's doable! It takes commitment, but in the world of veterinary medicine, where so much is about emotions and relating well with others, it is well worth the effort.

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